

## have yourself a merry little christmas by ceruleanstorm

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**Summary:**

Having drawn El's name for the AV club's Secret Santa, Mike Wheeler plans to give her a simple, personalized gift, along with a letter admitting his true feelings for her. But his friends and fellow club members have different plans. Will this be the holiday he finally have someone, or will he be left out in the cold?

Inspired by the "Christmas Party" episode of The Office.

## have yourself a merry little christmas

### Author's Note:

Hello all, Merry Christmas to those who celebrate, and to those who don't, how's your week going?

This fic was written for tumblr's Secret Santa for the Stranger Things fandom and is dedicated to @itselhopper who's amazing go follow her.

this was also inspired by the "Christmas Party" episode of The office. If you haven't watched The Office, please do it's on Netflix

*"Dear El,"*

*"A little to the left, Lucas!"*

*Dear? What is this the 1950s, Mike Wheeler thought to himself, tapping his pen on his chin, and shouldn't I call her Jane and not El?*

*"Okay, wait my left or your left?"*

*Nobody calls her Jane, and I've always called her El. You know what, I'll just stick with El.*

*"My left!"*

*"Well you're pushing the tree the wrong way then!"*

*"No I'm not!"*

*"Guys!" Mike shouted, looking up from his barely written letter to glare at his friends. "Do you really have to yell at each other? I'm trying to do something!"*

*Scoffing, Lucas rolled his eyes. "So are we Mike. And we aren't being that loud."*

*"Yes, yes you are!" Lucas and Dustin, when together, were always*

loud. It was as if the only way the two of them could communicate effectively was by yelling at each other. To an outsider, it would have seemed a maladaptive friendship with a terrible mode of communication, but on the other hand if you knew them, then you would have known that Dustin and Lucas were only showing off, and that they'd actually been best friends since Dustin moved to Hawkins in the fourth grade.

What had inspired their newest shouting match happened to be the decorations for the AV Club's Christmas Party they were throwing after school today. Mr. Clarke, being both their supervisor and fourth period teacher, had given them an hour or so to miss class and to set up. He told the three of them he didn't mind if they skipped because they were only studying for the final, and they were all passing the class with an A, something their other classmates couldn't say.

Like every year they'd thrown a party in middle school, Mike assumed the first high school Christmas party would be the same as they'd always been. There'd be a few snowflakes cut from white computer paper (Will's would always be the best and Dustin's would always look like Ninja throwing stars) and maybe some red and green streamers stolen from the teacher's lounge. The actual party would be spent eating the cookies Mike's mom made, and the popcorn Mr. Clarke brought, and watching one of the Star Wars films, arguing about whether or not it could be counted as a Christmas movie (Lucas and Mike firmly argued it was *not*, but Will and Dustin had yet to change their minds). But this year would be different. This would be the first year Max and El would join them; last year, neither could come. Max was too busy studying for her finals, and El was confined to the cabin until guaranteed freedom without further threat. Now they could all be together, all six of them, and have a *real* party this year.

The differences of having El and Max involved in the party were striking and obvious, in a good way. The previous night, El had spent four hours at Mike's house making different cookies and different cakes while Max had gone over to Will's and the two had spent a similar amount of time making paper snowflakes, snowmen, as well as little abominable snow monsters (Max's idea) and gathered several boxes of Ms. Byers' Christmas lights from the year before to string up

in the AV closet. Lucas, wanting to impress Max, suggested they move on from watching Star Wars at the party (“Even though we haven’t decided if Star Wars is a Christmas movie or not?” “No, Dustin, we have decided that!” “Okay, so we’re sure it’s a Christmas movie?” “Shut up!”) and play a real Christmas movie, letting El pick *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

“I’m getting branches up my nose, Lucas!” yelled Dustin, and out of the corner of Mike’s eye, he noticed Lucas pushing the tree ever so *slightly* in his friend’s direction.

“That’s because you keep pushing it the wrong way!” Lucas countered, still totally pushing the tree.

“I do not!”

The tree had been Dustin’s idea. “I think we should have a Christmas tree.” he had announced at the last meeting. “We can just put it in the corner of the room and use some of Will’s mom’s lights to decorate it. It’ll look totally rad!”

“Did you just say rad?” Mike asked his friend.

“Yeah, just trying it out. Do you think it worked?” Dustin’s eyes were extra eager so it was hard to shoot him down.

But Lucas did anyway. “No it did not.”

Dustin merely brushed it off (Dustin was good at not letting things get to him, a skill Mike was often jealous of) and continued with his extravagant plan for a gigantic evergreen that would be the bell of their ball. “And I’m not talking like a sad lame one from the Charlie Brown special, I’m talking about a *real* tree.”

“Hey!” El had taken that to offense, having immediately loved those specials after watching them with Chief Hopper. “I loved the tree in that, Charlie Brown was just doing his best. It wasn’t lame, it was sweet.”

“El’s right.” Mike defended her, ignoring the knowing looks he got from everyone else in the room *including* Mr. Clarke, “and besides how are we going to fit a tree in here? This room is technically a

closet.”

Dustin, alas, had ignored any critiques or warnings of his tree plans and had dragged an enormous, it had to be at least eight feet tall and four feet wide, Christmas tree that resembled a giant green hedgehog. How Dustin even got into the school without anyone making a big deal, Mike had no idea. All the other boy said when Mike asked was that his mom had dropped the tree off. Now, in a grand competition of who could be the most annoying, Lucas and Dustin were loudly attempting to stand the tree up in their very small closet of an AV room as Mike was trying to write his letter.

*“Dear El,”* was all he had managed to scribble down so far, *“When we met two year ago in the woods, I had no idea how important you would be to me. Then when you disappeared it was like there was no light anymore...”*

*No, that sounds stupid. And sappy. Don’t write that.* And so he crossed it out.

“Ah, man it’s scraping the ceiling!” whined Dustin, glancing up at the bent branches.

“Who’s fault is that?” Lucas asked with his hands on his hips. “Oh, I know, it’s Dustin’s!”

“Mr. Clarke isn’t going to like this. What should we do?” Dustin bit his lip and asked his friends.

Lucas just shook his head in disappointment. “Dude, you brought this on yourself. This whole tree idea was *your* idea. I’m not fixing this.”

“Ooh! I know!” Dustin perked up and jumped down from the chair he’d been standing on, and raced out of the room.

“What was that about?” Lucas and Mike exchanged looks, Lucas getting down from his chair as well.

“I have no idea man. I’m just glad I don’t have to help with that dumb tree, the stupid branches were giving me splinters. What are you working on?” asked Lucas, leaning over so he could look at Mike’s letter.

“Uh, um” Mike placed his hands over the writing, “I’m writing a letter for, um, for my Secret Santa.”

That was another change in their party plans this year. Having enough people in the group now, Mr. Clarke suggested they could exchange gifts and had them draw names out of a hat. Mike had drawn El’s name.

A mixture of panic and excitement flooded Mike’s veins when he unfolded the piece of paper he’d taken from the hat and saw her name. El was one of his closest friends, and maybe even something more than that, and he saw the gift as a chance to show her that.

After kissing her at the Snow Ball last December, Mike had just assumed they were a couple, even if El was under lockdown for another year. When he would visit her at the cabin, they’d share kisses and hold hands, and Mike thought that meant they were more than friends. But then came the day El delivered the news they could no longer date, because Hopper and Dr. Owen thought that it would be safer if she abstained from boyfriends.

“We’ll still be friends, right?” she asked him, her eyes wide and bright, like if Mike said no she would obviously be crushed.

Mike just nodded, and promised it was fine, and they went on with their lives. The kissing stopped, and the hand holding came to an end. Trying not act like El’s decision affected him, Mike began to snuff any romantic feelings he had for El out like a light. He couldn’t like her, he told himself, it’s dangerous for her and him. Mike, however, could never figure out why it was dangerous, it had been his previous notion that the Chief and the doctor wanted El to live a normal teenage life. Dating was a part of normal teenage life. And so he’d been angry for a long time. Not as angry, hurt, or as devastated as the 353 days he’d had to live without her. But still angry. Angry at Hopper and Owens for going against El’s own wishes (did they even ask her what she wanted?). Angry at himself for wanting more.

And deep down, Mike was scared too. Scared that El had been lying to him, using her surrogate father, as well as the doctor, as an excuse. Maybe she just didn’t want to be with him and couldn’t face telling him the truth. Maybe El didn’t like Mike the way Mike liked El.

Mike believed, or more so hoped, that this wasn't the reality, mostly because El was so against lying. El lived her life by the promise that "friends didn't lie," and she had promised that they were still friends. If the possibility remained that El could still like Mike, then Mike had to try again. Maybe if he told her how he *really* felt about her, she would be willing to try again with him. After all, they were older, El was now in school with them, so Mike could have a chance. One chance was all he needed.

And that's why this gift *had* to be absolutely perfect. To prove that he knew her and liked her the way she was. To prove he wanted to be more than friends.

"You're writing a *letter* to your Secret Santa? Man, that could be me! Why would you be writing your person a letter when you were supposed to get like a cool gift, Mike?" Lucas interrogated him, still trying to look at his letter.

Mike moved the letter away from Lucas' prying eyes. "It's a *part* of the gift, not the whole gift! And I don't have you so why does it matter?"

"Geeze, Mike calm down, I was only asking." Lucas relaxed. "Who did you get then?"

Biting his lip, Mike took a minute to think through the pros and cons of telling his friend. "El." he whispered, finally.

"El? That's rough. You should make sure you don't come on too strong, or it might tip her dad and the doctor off."

"I still want the gift to be special, though." Mike insisted. "We're still friends, I can still get her a nice gift. And besides," Mike tried not say the next part with any anger in his voice " boys flirt with El all the time and it doesn't tip anyone off."

"Because she always turns those guys down, Mike." Lucas pointed out, and Mike knew, it was the only thing that kept him from dying of jealousy. Even if she was only turning those boys down because she wasn't allowed to date them.

“Well, if she thinks it’s romantic, she can turn me down and I’ll just explain that it was never romantic in the first place.” Since Will had gone missing, Mike had perfected his ability to lie perfectly through his teeth, and it was coming in handy at this moment.

“Then why the letter?” Lucas questioned, a sly grin on his face.

Mike let out a sigh. “Maybe I’m using it to explain that none of the stuff I got her is supposed to be romantic.”

Lucas didn’t look like he really believed his friend but he let the letter go. “Well,” he asked, “what stuff did you get her?”

“Oh it’s cool,” Mike smiled before launching into explanation. “see, every time El’s at my house she’s always drinking tea with my mom, so I used my allowance and bought her this ceramic teapot because she loves tea but Hopper doesn’t have anything to make it in. Oh, and then I made her this mixtape of songs I’ve played for her that she really likes. And then there’s a couple of inside jokes we had, like I’m giving her my elementary school yearbook picture-”

“The one she thinks is super funny?” laughed Lucas.

“Yeah,” Mike nodded eagerly, “I don’t know she likes it so much, but it does make her laugh. I’m also giving El that toy dinosaur that I had, Roary, that probably will take too long to explain but also that twenty sided dice she borrowed from me at the beginning of summer and didn’t give it back until the end of summer, and a packet of hot sauce.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow. “A packet of hot sauce?”

“Yeah, once we were eating dinner at her house and we were eating hot dogs, but Hopper didn’t have any packets of ketchup so we’d tried to eat ours with hot sauce, by the way, bad idea, but El totally loved it. So yeah, hot sauce.”

“Cool, Mike, I think you’ve got a good gift. You’re gonna really have to explain yourself in your letter or Hopper’s gonna show up at your doorstep with his gun.” finished Lucas.

Rolling his eyes, Mike decided to change the subject. “Who’d you



get?”

“Oh, definitely not telling. But my gift is totally awesome. I think I have the best one.” Lucas nodded, that sly smile back on his face.

*I seriously doubt that.* Mike grinned, but kept that thought to himself. He was just about to ask Lucas *what* his gift was so he could try and guess who he had, but was interrupted when the door to the AV room flew open, and in stepped Dustin, wearing a big white bushy beard and Santa hat, carrying a smaller version of a hand held saw.

“Where’d did you get that?” Mike half-yelled at the same time Lucas shouted “Why do you have a saw?” both jumping away from the pointy edges of Dustin’s new weapon.

“The Woodshop class gave it to me.” Dustin said through his beard, as it if was simply nothing, “I’m gonna use to cut the top of the tree off.”

Together, all three of them glanced up at the tree, still bent where it met the tiles of the ceiling. “You’re not seriously?” Lucas asked as Dustin climbed onto a chair and began moving tree branches out of the way.

“Yep! Now get up here and help me, my loyal elf!” Dustin bellowed, adding a “Ho, ho, ho” laugh at the end.

As Lucas and Dustin began to argue again that no, Lucas refused to be an elf especially if it was Dustin being Santa, and that no, he didn’t have to help Dustin in his crazy plan to saw the top of the tree off, Mike sat back down and continued in his letter where he had left off.

“Dear El... When we met a year ago in the woods, I had no idea how important you would be to me. *Then when you disappeared it was like there was no light anymore*, I called you every night on the radio just because I wanted so badly to hear your voice-”

*Is that too romantic?* Mike shook his head, trying not to think about what Lucas had said. *It doesn’t matter, just keep going...*

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“Alright you guys,’ Mr. Clarke announced with a chipper voice, standing up from his desk. “It’s time. Is all the food ready?”

El looked up from the little tray of fruit she was preparing. “Almost done.”

Behind her Will was grabbing the cake and Max took the tray of cookies. “We’re ready, Mr. C.” Will affirmed.

“Okay then, once Ms. El is done, we’ll just head on down. I hope the rest of the boys got the movie ready.”

“Well we sent Lucas, Mike, *and* Dustin to do so I bet their just arguing and haven’t gotten anything done.” Max pointed out.

“Yeah, and Dustin probably burnt the popcorn.” added Will

El had to stifle her laugh. Although she adored her friends, she had doubts they could get anything done when they were in the mood to argue. With care, El picked up the fruit platter and followed the others out the door.

“Well then, we’ll just have to pop some more.” Mr. Clarke said, his tone very official.

“Mr. Clarke,” asked Max from behind them, “are you ever not super cheerful?”

Their teacher and supervisor pursed his lips. “The only time I can think of is when I was writing my dissertation for my doctorate.”

“I thought that was like a few weeks ago.” Will raised an eyebrow, almost tripping and dropping the cake until El steadied him in her mind. He sent her a grateful look.

“And maybe that’s why I yelled at Marcus and got him suspended.” said Mr. Clarke.

“You got Marcus suspended? As in that kid who kept drawing dicks on desks in permanent marker?” Max shouted her response, making El laugh again, mostly at the delighted shock on her friend’s face.

“Language, Max, but yes, I got him suspended.” he nodded, a sly smile on his face as they turned the corner.

“Okay, then, well for this Christmas, I’m making Mr. Clarke my hero. What a way to end 1985.”

“Thank you, Max, I’m honored.”

“Did you guys drop your secret Santa gifts off at the room already?” Will asked them.

“Yeah,” El told Will “Max and I dropped ours off this morning.” Max nodded her agreement.

“Oh cool, me too.” And with that final from Will, they arrived at the AV room, or as Max so lovingly had dubbed it last August, the Nerd Closet.

El was not smart in the way the Mike, Will, Lucas, Dustin, or even Max was smart. She came into highschool with a lower reading level and a watery understanding of basic mathematical and scientific principles. This had not been a deterring obstacle in the way of catching up to the others; her reading teacher offered to tutor her and so had Mr. Clarke, and her dad helped in every way he knew how, like buying her extra books to read and checking her math homework every night. She had to study more than the others, and was often lost in class until she could get a teacher or one her friends to explain it to her one-on-one, but El’s grades had risen and now were only slightly behind her friends.

But just because El wasn’t as smart as the rest of them, didn’t mean she wasn’t invited to join the AV club. On the contrary, they had begged her. Max had already been going to meetings since the incident with Dart had been her informal initiation, and desperately

wanted another girl, especially now that they were getting along. Will wanted her in as well, the other boys and Max being loud beyond measure, he wanted another calm quiet person to have actual conversations with, and not just shouting matches. Lucas and Dustin thought she would be great with tech because of her gifts, making her particularly adept with radio waves. They were quick to teach her the concepts of BASIC, the computer language that Bob Newby had used to save their lives back in 84, and El picked it up as fast as the others did. And then there was Mike, who was probably the biggest reason she decided to join.

El would follow Mike until the ends of the earth. Oh, she knew the sounded foolish and rather like a damsel in distress, but it was true. (Besides Mike was so klutzy and impulsive El thought he could use the protection any way.) Mike was El's lifeline to the Earth, and she was not giving that up. No matter what her dad or Doctor's Owens said.

Mr. Clarke had opened the door, and El and Max almost dropped their food when they looked around him into the AV room.

"Oh my *god*, did a Christmas tree explode in here?" yelled Max, completely gobsmacked.

Will peeked around her. "No, but it's definitely shedding."

The massive Christmas tree taking up most of the room was covered in messy lights and tinsel, that was also adorning the floor. *This must be what Dustin dragged in. Oh god, I hope it doesn't have squirrels in it.* Dustin and Lucas stood inside the room fighting. (Dustin was also holding a tiny saw?) and Mike was on his knees by the giant tree trying to arrange the presents. At the very top of the tree, hung the tree top from one branch.

"What's that?" asked Max, pointing to tree.

"Oh!" Dustin lit up and pointed at his saw. "The tree was too big so I tried to cut the top off and it wouldn't break off so I'm just letting it hang there to see what happens."

"Wow, okay." And Max didn't say anything after that.

"You guys can put the food on the table." Mr. Clarke told her, Max and Will, then he turned back to the others, "Explain this wild tree Mr. Henderson, please."

"Yes, my lord!" Dustin whirled around, and Max had to duck out the way of his saw.

"Careful, Dustin!" Max scolded, "Oh and by the way, we just found out Mr. Clarke was the reason Marcus got suspended, so I hope you have a good reason."

"Mr. Clarke suspended Marcus? He's definitely my hero then." decided Dustin.

"I thought that was Steve." Lucas rolled his eyes and came to stand by Max.

All of this, El ignored. Her eyes fell on Mike, still trying to find the best array for the gifts, and stayed there. That's all it seemed like she ever did recently, stare at Mike, hoping just once he'd looked back. She studied his face with care, his cheekbones, his freckles, his curls, trying not to fixate on what she couldn't have, because it would only make her heart hurt.

Foolishly, El had thought that being kept from Mike in the year before the gate closed was the most heartbreak anyone could ever feel. It was this terrible cocktail and yearning and wishing, and anger directed at the man who kept them from ever having contact. What was worse, actually, was being told, "El, you can go to school, see your friends, and just be a normal kid, but you can't date Mike, okay? He's a good kid, and if I'd have you date anybody, it'd be him but, the doc thinks it's dangerous for you to be that close to somebody. He thinks... he thinks you'd be a liability, in his life."

And worse than that? Being the one to tell Mike they couldn't date, they couldn't be normal kids, they'd never be like anyone else. Sleep didn't find El that night, because everytime she closed her eyes all she could see was the heartbreak in his eyes.

She thought Mike would fight for them. El tried to herself, but her dad shut her down everytime. And Mike did nothing. He gave up,

and had moved on from her, despite every single hint that she didn't want to just be one of his friends. She wanted everything and got nothing.

*Don't dwell on this now*, she chastised herself as the others pulled up chairs around the tree so they could open the gifts, *can't you go a few hours with him and not think about what you want, he doesn't want you, you're a liability*. It stung, the words she beat herself with, but she couldn't help it. El took the farthest chair away from Mike, and tried not to look at his face.

"Alright, let's get started." Mr. Clarke stood up and picked up one of the gifts. "Dustin can I have the Santa hat?"

Everyone looked at Dustin as he looked at Mr. Clarke, then back at everybody else. "But then I'll only be wearing the beard and that'll look weird."

"Fine," Mr. Clarke sighed, "you can be Santa then." So their teacher took a seat, handed Dustin the present, and gave up. Standing triumphant, Dustin read the name off the wrapping paper.

"Ms. El Hopper, this gift is for you."

El took her gift from Dustin and sat back down, feeling excited eyes on her as she took the wrapping paper off to reveal a white box. Her heart began to beat fast as she opened the box and revealed what the gift was. A beautiful blue ceramic teapot. There was only one person who even knew she was getting into tea, and that she was only getting into tea because she was spending so much time at *his* house with *his* mom. This had to be from-

"It's from me." Mike said quietly, and El's heart skipped a beat. He was wearing one of those dorky sweaters she loved so much.

"Thank you," El tried to keep her voice from squeaking as she spoke. "I love it."

Mike gave her a small side smile, before pointing at her new teapot. "There's a little more to it-"

Dustin hadn't been paying attention and had begun talking again.

“This next one’s to Mike.”

El pretended not to notice how quickly Mike’s attention had turned. Suddenly everyone’s focus was on the gift, and what Mike was about to say to her was lost forever.

It turned out that Dustin was Mike’s secret Santa, giving his friend several new comic books Mike had been wanted as well as a new Atari game. Will was up next, and Max had bought him two brand sketchbooks and some colored pencils, joking that he could now retire the old ones. In turn, Will had given Dustin a new hat and a book about amphibians, a joke that sent the rest of the group into laughter.

El finally perked up when it was time for Lucas to get his gift. She had gotten him a new He Man doll, as his last one had been destroyed by his sister Erica, and picked out a couple of new bandanas to go along with it. Lucas lit one when he opened his gift, and even gave El a hug when she revealed herself, filling El with the warmth she loved that came from giving gifts.

This left Max as the last person to receive and gift, and Lucas the last person to give one. Gingerly, Max took the red wrapping paper off the box Santa Dustin gave her from under the tree.

“Woah.” whispered Max. Opening her hand she revealed a small translucent glass bottle with a brass top, filled with a pretty pink liquid. *Perfume!* El only knew from watching so much TV. Her dad never let her try for his rightful fear of her becoming addicted to the stuff. And it was always so expensive.

“I hope you like it,” Lucas told her, rubbing the back of his neck. “My mom picked it out, I have like no knowledge of any of that stuff-”

“Lucas,” Max cut him off. El sent her friend a worried look when she heard the panic in Max’s voice. “This stuff is like fifty dollars!” There was a small gasp from among the room.

“So?” asked a confused Lucas.

“So, there was a twenty dollar limit! You weren’t supposed to go over

it!” Max shoved the bottle back into Lucas hand and he shoved it back in hers.

“Think of it as like an anniversary gift. Not just a Secret Santa present.” Lucas tried, but Max wouldn’t take it. El turned away, especially from Mike, knowing her friends could probably see it in her face that she was jealous Max and Lucas were getting to celebrate an anniversary.

“That’s *still* too much for an anniversary gift Lucas!” Max insisted with a stomp of her foot. “You have to tell your mom to return it!”

“No, Max, just relax. My mom would want you to have it-”

“Obviously you don’t know anything about me, Sinclair.” growled the red head. With one final shove, Max put the perfume bottle back in her boyfriend’s hand, turned around, and stormed out, leaving Lucas collapsed in a chair with his head in his hands.

Right as the door slammed shut, a thud could be heard as they all jumped backwards and the top of the tree finally broke off.

Dustin, in his Santa beard, looked from the fallen tree limb, to the rest of his remaining friends, back to the tree top that he had spent forever sawing away at, took a deep breath and said, “Happy birthday, Jesus. Sorry your party’s so lame.”

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For a Christmas party of firsts, Mike had decided that this was by far the worst party. He could ignore his two dating friends getting into a spat right in the middle with Lucas’ present being a total disaster, but then there had been his present.

Sure, El loved the teapot, and that was a win. But she hadn’t seen the



rest of the gifts (which by the way Lucas, had all been under twenty dollars) and she hadn't read the letter. And the worst part about it was that she was probably never going to.

When Max had run out and the tree top had fallen, El had run out after her, still clutching the blue teapot. Mr. Clarke, to ease the insinuating awkwardness of the whole situation put the VCR in and started the movie. They watched in intervals of silence, every few minutes or so trying to talk Lucas out of beating himself up.

"I'm so stupid!" Lucas hit himself of the forehead. "Max has the big thing about money and I totally just ignored it. Probably just won the award for worst boyfriend." *At least you can even say you're her boyfriend.*

"Lucas, you shouldn't get angry at yourself. You were just trying to do something nice for her, she'll see that eventually." Will told him, and the others nodded their agreement.

"You don't know that." Lucas just shook his head, and silence they fell back into.

About half way through the movie, the door to the AV room rattled and in came Max and El- holding the wrong presents.

Shock spread through Mike's body, followed quickly by panic, but Max began to explain herself before he could say anything. "Okay, it's okay! El and I switched, she'll take the perfume and I'll take the teapot."

Anger swirled in Mike's head, making him dizzy. His mind racing, he tried to find the words to express this feeling of betrayal. He and El were supposed to be *friends*. And friends didn't do shitty things like that to each other.

But Mike, still growing when it came to the way his emotions took over and banishing his logical mind to the passenger seat, was too involved in his own fury to notice the way El was making herself small as possible behind Max. Guilt was written all over herself the way a child took a marker to a blank paper: messy and hard to follow. But of course Mike noticed none of those things. He couldn't

even look at her.

Yet Mike was not the only one letting his emotions control him. Lucas was out of his seat immediately, rationale out the window. “But I got that for you, Max, not El.”

“El and I talked, it’s cool.” Max told her fuming boyfriend, her shoulders surprisingly relaxed. “She’s always wanted to try perfume, so we traded.”

“We got presents for specific people, that’s the whole point of Secret Santa. What next, are you going to tell Dustin to give his new hat to will? The teapot was for El!” Mike took a deep breath to steady his shaking voice. Then he gave in and looked at El, but she wasn’t looking at him. Like always.

“Will, I love you man, but I’m not giving you my new hat.” huffed Dustin. Next to him Will nodded.

“I understand.”

Collapsing back into his chair was all Mike could do. Why the hell was he having to be punished for a fight between *Max and Lucas*? This matter had nothing to do with him and El. He’d already had to watch his two friends enjoy being together, a luxury he was cut off from with El. Their happiness made him happy, but it also brought a new kind of sadness that came like a knife in his back.

“Mike, please don’t be upset,” El said suddenly, “I’ve always wanted to try perfume and- and I- I’m sorry, okay? I was just trying to help.”

Mike was not doing this, not here, not right now. “I hope Max enjoys the teapot.”

It was Mr. Clarke who came to save them from the new awkwardness by suggesting Max and El take their seats and continue the movie. There was a collective sigh of relief from Dustin and Will who were at the mercy of their friends’ romantic issues. All they had wanted was to come to the party and eat cookies.

As Mike watched the movie, a part of him wished they had just gone with one of the Star Wars movies instead. *It’s a Wonderful Life* panned

out in front of him and he couldn't help but feel as if he had been there, done that. Mike had spent 353 days without Eleven, more than the few hours this man spent wishing he'd never been born. Mike sometimes wished that. Maybe not for long, but the thought lingered.

He never did notice El and Max talking in the back of the room.

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"Well, I'd say the party was a success." Dustin said as they grabbed their coats and backpacks and turned off the lights in the AV room. It was just him, Will, and Mike. El had gone with Mr. Clarke to offer the remaining food to any remaining teachers in the building, and Lucas and Max had gone to talk.

"You dragged a massive tree in here that tried to kill us while Max and Lucas had a massive fight in front of all of us and Mike almost El cry and then movie did make her cry, and you cried too." Will stated, his a matter-of-fact grating slightly on Mike's nerves. But guilt made him bite his tongue. Had he really almost made her cry?

It was obvious to him that he'd been a jerk, he was smart enough to know that. And for every part of him that argued he had a right to be angry with her, another part of him understood what she'd been trying to do, to keep the peace. She shouldn't of had to do that task alone. Maybe he would call her tonight, after the rest of the anger dissipated, and they could just talk to each other, and everything would go back to normal.

*Normal, yeah,* a voice in the back of his head said, *Weren't you trying to change that?*

The boys said goodbye to each other, Dustin and Will heading out the back of the school where Mrs. Henderson waited to take them home,

Mike toward the front where he would have to wait for his mom to come pick him up after Holly's ballet practice.

As Mike walked out the doors into the cold December air, he tried to gauge where he should go from here. Max was one hundred percent likely to open the letter and then tell El, leaving him with a massive amount of explaining to do, unless he could get to Max first. Maybe it wasn't such a bad thing, for Max to deliver the news instead of him. Then he would have time to prepare for the blow of having El turn him down, and he'd be like all others boys that had ever tried to love her.

*Or you could just tell her right now,* Mike thought to himself as he looked up. A couple feet away from them, El sat by the bike rack, her back to him. As he got closer, the butterflies in his stomach got stronger, when he noticed she was singing a Christmas carol, sweetly to herself.

El's voice was beyond beautiful to him. Before the school year began, the Chief had convinced her to try out for the high school choir, because according to him, she was always singing along with radio and at the cabin. Mike had never heard her sing, up until she joined choir, El had been too shy to sing front of anyone who wasn't Hopper. But now she sang all the time, like some siren from mythology luring him straight to death. Music came easy to her, unlike science and math, and it made her happy. Something he couldn't do.

"Have yourself a merry little Christmas, let your heart be light," El sang to herself, "from now on, our troubles will be out of sight."

Mike took a seat next to her, and she turned around, that pretty smile on her face. "Hey," he said, "What's going on?"

Her eyes were bright as she told him, "Oh, just checking out my new present." Mike's mouth dropped in surprise when instead of the bottle of perfume, El pulled out the teapot. "I'm going to ask my Dad if he can take me to the store so I can buy some tea bags and make some when we get home."

"You switched back!" Mike half-shouted, unable to keep the

happiness out of his voice if he tried.

“Yeah,” El nodded, “I talked to Max. I told her I understood that she didn’t want the perfume, but that I really wanted your present. And she took it back and gave this to me.”

The smile on Mike’s face was so big it was almost painful. “You know, there’s more to it.”

“What?” El lit up.

“Yeah,” he nodded, “open the lid.”

“Okay,” El smiled that pretty smile that made Mike’s heart beat too fast and she opened the teapot. “Woah!”

Carefully, she pulled out the mixtape he’d made for her. “It’s all the ones I’ve played you, that you- that you liked.”

“Oh, Jonathan and Will are going to be so betrayed.” El threw her head back and laughed, “Is Africa on here?” she asked him eagerly.

He nodded and she pumped her fist in the air. “Breakfast club move,” she laughed again before turning back to the present, “What’s this- oh my God, it’s your picture from elementary school!”

“Since you liked it so much.” Mike laughed with her, scratching the back of his neck. “I still don’t know why.”

“Because you look so adorable!” explained El, touching the picture that she held in her hand, “I think this is my favorite out of all of it.”

“There’s still more.” El dove back in, pulling out Roary and the dice.

“Oh, it’s Roary! I remember him.” El told him, pressing the tiny button that gave him his namesake.

“You do?” Mike raised an eyebrow. He’d just assumed he was going to have to explain that one to her.

Nodding, El laughed as she talked, “Yeah, it was the first day we were together. You stayed home from school and were showing me

your room. You showed me Yoda and then Roary. You were trying to impress me.” El tilted her head with a sly smile.

“Did it work?” he swallowed.

El cackled. “Mike, it was a toy dinosaur, what do you think? But it does have sentimental value, so I’ll treasure him forever.”

“At least he has a good home.” Mike chuckled.

“Hey, are you giving me my lucky dice back?” asked El, holding the di up in the winter sun. Mike gave her a nod and she smiled again. God, he loved it when she smiled. “Yay, now I can actually do some damage when we play! What’s this- hot sauce! Oh my gosh, Mike.”

“I still have no idea how you eat hotdogs with hot sauce, or anything with that much hot sauce.” Mike told her.

“Because it tastes good, Mike. You just have a weak tongue.” El shook her head at him, and then she pulled the letter out. “What’s this?” she asked, caressing the white envelope.

This time Mike’s heart was beating out of panic instead of affection. With shaking hands he gently took the letter from her hands, ignoring her surprised expression. “It’s not important.” Mike said, looking away from her.

“Mike,” El warned in that voice he knew all too well, but then she put her hand in his. “Friends don’t lie, remember?”

*Friends, yeah, friends. Because that’s all we’ll ever be.*

“What’s in the letter, Mike? Can I please read it?” El tried again, squeezing his hand when he wouldn’t respond.

“I should-” he stuttered, “I should probably just tell you what’s in the letter.”

“Okay.” she whispered.

*Are you really going to do this? Are you really going to tell her? Are you really doing this?!?! Abort! Abort! Abort- WOULD YOU PLEASE SHUT*

UP? Mike mentally silenced himself, took a deep breath, and then began.

“El,” he started, “I still like you, like more than friends.”

He heard her gasped, but he was doing this, and there was no more stopping him. “And I know you can’t date, and that’s okay with me, but I still have to try. I think you’re smart and kind and -and thoughtful and really beautiful, and I just need to know- to know if I, if we, still have a chance?”

Mike took another shaky breath and glanced up at her and... and she wasn’t looking at him. His shoulders collapsed and his face fell.

*You’re so stupid. How were you dumb enough to actually believe she could like you? She’s this amazing fighter and you’re- you’re- you’re you! How could El possibly-* But then something brought his chastising thoughts to a racing halt. Her cold hand on his cheek- and then her lips on his.

They stayed like that, frozen in that infinite minute, until El pulled away. Mike looked up and met her watering eyes. She nodded, and that was all he needed.

He kissed her again, this time with no intent to ever end it ever. Mike could feel El smiling, there noses bumping together and they tried despite inexperience, kissing until they both erupted into laughter.

“Mike?” her voice was tentative as she put her hands on his face, “Will you be my boyfriend?”

Happiness rushed through him like electricity and he wanted to scream YES!, but there was a jolt of something else. “What about- what about the rule? If it’s dangerous for you then I don’t-”

“I don’t care if it’s dangerous, Mike! I want to be with you!” There was that smile again, that same one that struck him in the heart and made him love her from the start.

“You do?” It was like he didn’t even need to ask. Because El didn’t lie.

“Yes.” El nodded, biting her lip, “do you?”

He brought El closer until their foreheads were touching. “Yes.”

Later Mike and El would look back on that Christmas as probably their best. They went to Hopper and told him simply, they were going to date, and nothing he or Doctor Owens said was going to change that. Hopper had slapped Mike on the back, laughing about how it took the two of them this long. But, for now Mike’s hands found their way into El’s hair as they waited for their rides and she laughed, “Merry Christmas, Mike.”

“Merry Christmas, El.”

**Author's Note:**

coming soon: part 2 to you are the best thing (that's ever been mine)

more drabbles for Every Breath You Take

and a New Years story feating father/daughter duo  
El and Jim Hopper.

thank you for reading.